

## **Women’s Role in Securing Sustainable Development and Peace – South Asia**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This study intends to document the role and status of women in South Asian peace building initiatives by identifying them as key “peace builders” in various contexts. The central argument is that sustainable development and peace initiatives cannot be sustained without women’s equal participation. Economies are less prosperous, peace solutions are more fragile, and peacekeeping missions are less credible without including women. The paper aims to support and define female roles and positions in peace building efforts by recognizing female ‘peace builders’ in different realms of our society. By adopting an inside-out approach, the study looks at how we can re-harness the links already established between the South Asia region, particularly Pakistan and Afghanistan, whilst focusing on more indigenous solutions and commonalities to address the existing grievances and work towards a sense of more sustainable peace. In doing so, discussion and deliberation on why and how women-led regional networks in soft areas of mutual collaboration are lacking is a central question. And how women are potential can be proactively employed for long-lasting regional peace.

To understand Women’s position in peace and stability, the paper proposes an analysis of cross-cutting fields and areas where women can define their roles as peace builders and exercise their decision-making power. By referring to the principles of UNSCR 1325 for guidance, this article aims to tease apart how these groups differ in their needs, priorities, and capacity to advocate nonviolence and peace building (United States Institute of Peace, 2015).

**Keywords:** Women, Economic Development, Sustainable Peace, South Asia.

### **Introduction**

Sustainable peace and development solutions must include women. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and Resolution 1325 of the Council of the United Nations on Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) position women at the helm of economic security and development. Thus, it is crucial for communities on all scales to engage with the international community to foster women's increased participation in sustainable development, peace building, and peacekeeping strategies. South Asian nations have demonstrated an optimistic trend in gender

equality and greater accessibility to education, with women involved in corporate structures, healthcare, farming and leadership positions. However, it must be highlighted that there is still a great deal of work to be done to enable all women and men to realize and develop their full potential and contribution to economic growth, therefore ensuring sustainable peace.

According to World Bank 2020 statistics, 48.4% of the South Asian population is females. The estimated female literacy rate in the South Asian region is approximately 66%, according to the World Bank's 2020 statistics (The World Bank Group, 2022). South Asian society is defined by patriarchal norms and structural inequalities which hinder women's participation in public and political spheres. According to the World Bank report titled '*The South Asia Regional Gender Action Plan FY 16-21*,' the gender gaps in South Asia are primarily attributed to regressive social norms and structural violence that gives privilege to men and boys by providing greater access to opportunities and resources than women and girls.

Across the Afghanistan-Pakistan borderlands, hundreds of millions of women continue to be denied access to education and professional advancement based on traditional cultural and patriarchal socio-cultural norms. According to the World Economic Forum, Pakistan was classified as the second-worst nation in terms of gender parity and faring better than only Afghanistan. Pakistan is ranked 145th out of 146 countries, according to the most recent Global Gender Gap Report. Interestingly, Afghanistan and Pakistan are neighboring countries, enjoying around 2640 km long border with socio-cultural and linguistic similarities and influences across their border areas. Another issue is the geo-political situation in the two countries, whereby Afghanistan has been a war and conflict-ridden country for almost four decades, and the spillover has affected Pakistan as well, having to deal with terrorism and related issues. As a result, women and children have been adversely affected and continue to suffer. Moreover, many breadwinners (men) died during the conflict, leaving women as the sole bread earners in their households without any know-how. This has put enormous pressure on women due to their sociocultural background.

This paper argues why prioritizing women's economic empowerment and entrepreneurship is critical. In doing so, one has to be mindful of the ground realities of the conflict-ridden or conflict-prone zones, which should be a baseline of all the research and policymaking initiatives. This means contextual understanding and mapping of the particular 'conflict hotspot' is critically needed to craft a viable role of women through economic entrepreneurship for setting out sustainable peace and stability. Evidence shows that women's involvement in economic development initiatives and peace negotiations contributes to the quality and durability of sustainable development (UNDP, 2016).

Hence, this study urges adopting an indigenous approach towards women empowerment which does not challenge the status quo but instead enlists the indigenous dynamics of Pak-Afghan societal norms and see how to empower women within the existing system. In this context, the core aim of the present

research is to assess how women's empowerment in the conflictual zones of Pakistan and Afghanistan can divisively contribute towards peace, stability and development. The research adopted qualitative methods to attain this objective and acquired data from primary and secondary sources. Using analyzed data, the study concludes that the role of women across all dimensions of sustainable development is underrepresented in the region.

It has long been acknowledged that women entrepreneurs play a pivotal role in fostering inclusive economic growth in the region. Nevertheless, it has become more evident than ever that governments disregard women's critical contribution in all aspects and stages of development, such as employers, employees, skill builders, and drivers to financial strength, operating at their peril (Chemonics, 2017).

### **Research Framework**

Theoretically, a 'Ground-reality based model' is proposed that makes a significant connection between development, gender and peace to explain the role of female entrepreneurship in adding to sustainable peace. That is, South Asian women's effectiveness as an equal partner for development and peace building requires a holistic approach and should be conceived as a long-term project. There is no quick fix available, and an informed understanding of the contextual parameters is critically needed. An enhanced women's representation in leadership and policymaking positions can pave the way for development-based solutions and the region's peacefulness. This lens of analysis aims to assess the role of women's empowerment and solve the gender gap in the war zones of Pakistan and Afghanistan. The research highlights that peace and development are complementary factors and cannot be achieved in isolation. They are like two sides of a coin. Without one another, they cannot exist (Trimble, 2018).

The research model operationalized in this study urges empowering women from within the system by exploring indigenous entrepreneurship models so that they can serve as tools of sustainable development and peace. Strategies implemented by forums/organizations working on indigenous women empowerment models, like the South Asian Women Development Forum (SAWDF), are testimonials to be considered in the Pak-Afghan borderland.

The study expounds that the real challenge is that not all conflicts are alike. Thus, to implement Sustainable Development Goals 5, 8, 10 and 16 stresses: Gender Equality, Decent Employment and Economic Growth, Reduced Disparities and Justice, Peace, and Solid Institutions, respectively. Given this, it is necessary to adopt an indigenous approach; for example, lessons can be learned from Nepal, where organizations like Women for Peace and Democracy Nepal (WPD Nepal) and National Indigenous Women Forum (NIWF) are working with indigenous women and girls across Nepal to empower and support women (UNDP, 2022).

## **Key Questions**

The paper explores the following interrelated questions:

1. Why does recognizing and empowering women as tools for sustainability in different fields matter in the context of today's conflicts?
2. How the inclusion of women as peacemakers and agents for development beyond the state-centric models fosters peace and stability within the conflictual zones?
3. How can an indigenized and inclusive approach in Afghanistan's contemporary Taliban - led regime to be inculcated?
4. How can a conducive ecosystem be initiated and sustained that empowers women to aid long-term peace economically?

## **Situational Analysis**

With women making up 50 percent of the population in both countries (Afghanistan and Pakistan), according to the World Bank, female entrepreneurship stands at only one percent. Women in Afghanistan and Pakistan's war and conflict zones have faced the brunt. They have been disproportionately and adversely affected, being primary sufferers on all fronts – physical and emotional and have remained economically disenfranchised and labelled as perpetrators, facilitators and agents of 'others' specifically by the extremist non-state actors. Women's visible engagement in trade and business is often dubbed as 'unethical', and they are repeatedly targeted for a kill, considered a threat to one's life and family. In such situations, violence against women and girls of sorts is quite common, including erecting barriers to their fundamental rights, including the right to educational and vocational training schools, access to markets, and even health services become a considerable challenge in almost all the conflictual areas (specifically in South Asia – Afghanistan). Malala Yousafzai is one such glaring example of being victimized by a target shooting in Swat – Pakistan, in 2012. It is an unfortunate example of how women and young girls are targeted when they challenge the status quo, especially in areas with a presence of orthodox conservative mind-sets (Hesford, 2013). In this context, women's economic empowerment remains an untapped source of having an inclusive and just society by stakeholders across the board, a huge opportunity lost to prosperity and development.

Afghanistan and Pakistan have the most disconcerting gender disparity in economic involvement and growth, according to the latest 2022 World Economic Forum report (World Economic Forum, 2022). It is, therefore, imperative to adopt and devise an inclusive, sustainable human development approach at the centre of empowering women as agents of peace and development. Fundamentally, it is about furthering humanity and human welfare by creating an atmosphere where everyone has an equal opportunity, without discrimination, to realize their full

potential, decide for themselves and live productive, secure, and fulfilling lives. With that regard, there is a need to develop a network across the board comprising the representatives of the government, women entrepreneurs, academia, agriculturist and women in media to highlight and address the issues of inequality in access to opportunities, including income generation and employment decent work with dignity, mobility, and accessibility to health, education and other basic services. Hence, adopting a gender-responsive approach to identify these indigenous challenges, in addition to identifying barriers women entrepreneurs face at the micro, small and medium levels, is necessary.

Moreover, public-private partnerships comprising relevant public sector, community organizations and international organizations should focus on improving the low female literacy rate across the conflictual Pak-Afghan zone that has reduced the size of opportunities available to women. The main reasons for the low literacy rate of women in Pakistan and Afghanistan, as compared to men, including deeply embedded socio-cultural mindsets coupled with inadequate resource allocation and emphasis by the government in the education sector. To address the issue, policymakers need to target the media and clergy and commit funding with a comprehensive and holistic approach. There is a need for utilizing radio, door-to-door awareness campaigns within the tribal set-up, spreading awareness through local clergy, and calling Jirga sessions regarding the importance and benefits of female education in an articulate manner that should not seem to challenge the status quo in that area.

Moreover, women in South Asia, particularly in Pakistan and Afghanistan, are constricted due to the traditional family setup. The fact that women lack a conducive support structure and have the full responsibility of looking after their home makes it difficult for them to work. There is a need to address the social norms and cultural barriers through an indigenized and inclusive approach to utilize the untapped potential of women. Support groups such as the Afghan Women's Network (AWN) and Women's peace and development groups should be encouraged to promote women's engagement as peace negotiators and development agents.

Women's role in establishing social cohesion within communities is increasingly being recognized. They should be enabled to contribute as agents of peace through economic security by empowering women with a substantial support framework to overcome institutional barriers such as lack of start-up funding, inadequate supervision and counseling services, separate bank accounts, insufficient resources for business expansion, as well as an absence of financial knowledge about individual business areas. In short, scaling up existing resources for women-led peace building work is central to sustainable development. The United Nations Development Program's (UNDP) efforts across Pakistan and Afghanistan conflictual zones prove the adverse effects of women's exclusion and the positive impact of women's inclusion. This calls for more participatory policymaking.

Thus, as echoed in the UN's Sustainable Development Goals and WPS SCR 1325, there is a need to articulate and adopt contextualized gender lens at all levels, including at the grass-root level within the conflictual areas to implement not only the sole goal of gender but to achieve all development goals and targets mandating gender integration.

The study uncovers the role of empowering women and achieving economics of stability and peace and its link with development. Women are used as means for economic growth; henceforth, peace is not fully capitalized. The Pak-Afghan region's political mainstream is, by and large, male-dominated, especially under the existing socio-economic and political scenario in Afghanistan; it stands dedicated to men entirely. Women are also pushed to the background, where they make negligible contributions to the country's social progress. In addition, women's rights are not adequately protected, which keeps them from fully contributing or participating in various socio-economic and political development of their country; instead, they are subjected to many heinous violations. Besides, women are significantly impacted by climate change and environmental issues, an area mainly ignored in policies and laws that needs immediate attention to include women's participation and gender lens in all its aspects and phases.

The present research endeavours to register the comparatively less focused areas such as Education, Economic Entrepreneurship, Health, and Arts and Culture as plausible avenues to further Pak-Afghan women mainstreaming for sustainable peace and development across the board. The following discussion deliberates how women's role in different fields can be harnessed to germinate economic uplift adding to the prospects of sustainable peace and development in the region.

### **Education and the Role of Academia**

Educationists play a vital part in the formation of our society. Recognizing female educationists and empowering them as agents of development and peace promotes integration. The engagement of educationists and academia can enable a human-centric peace process and diffuse radical Violent Extremism thought patterns among students. Although numerous collaborative research initiatives among female academic networks exist, mainly focusing on the interpretation of history, peace and conflict resolution, economic, health, social and political challenges and empowerment – no comprehensive framework to assess the impact of such efforts is documented. Moreover, there is a disconnect between the intellectual strides and policymaking by the respective governments. Hence, it is imperative to address the existing gap and work constructively to minimize the perceived roadblocks that female peace visionaries face in the highly fragmented South Asian context.

This study dwells on the critical question: how to inject an element of sustainability and futuristic parameters into the women-centered educationist role regarding sustainable development in the region? Moreover, how a multi-disciplinary educational enterprise through women be crafted to reign in the rising

tide of Youth radicalization in the Pak-Afghan borderland? Here, dialogue and introspection to reclaim and remold the culturally, religiously, and traditionally held women's role as the 'nurturer of nation' for peace be initiated – for the benefit of all!

## **Economic Empowerment and Entrepreneurship**

According to the World Bank report, female employment stands at just 32.6% in the South Asian Region, and females constitute only per cent of Pakistan's entrepreneurs (International Labour Organization, 2021). Tapping and recognizing women's entrepreneurship and empowerment are essential to peace building efforts and sustainable development (Welthungerhilfe, 2022). This can be done through building alliances with strategic groups. The study aims to register how to initiate a fruitful dialogue involving Pak-Afghan women entrepreneurship as peace agents. Furthermore, how women-led economic enterprises are pivotal in their economic empowerment and peace building efforts?

It has been proved by many studies and findings that gender equality and women's empowerment are integral to sustainable development (Hudson et al., 2012). A state has a lower probability of civil strife where women are partners and stakeholders in the country's economy (Mechoulan et al., 2016; Woetzel et al., 2015). Initiating and promoting an inclusive process geared towards recognizing and empowering women's role as peace builders will have far-reaching consequences in better addressing the underlying dynamics and conflict drivers. In turn, this will help identify the necessary capabilities for the consolidation and continuity of a sustainable state. Thus, increasing women's contribution and demonstration in leadership and policymaking positions coupled with viable economic and development opportunities leads to better growth and peaceful solutions and outcomes.

Pak-Afghan context exhibits a patriarchal mindset which hinders it from capitalizing on its educated women contribution. The lack of opportunities, and restrictive marketplace access, coupled with the structural violence against women entrepreneurs, need attention. It is suggested that the role of technology in enabling women-led enterprises should be capitalized on. Additionally, there is a need to develop innovative economic-peace building forums focusing on ecofeminism and a shared vision of sustainable farming practices across the board to monetize the role of women in an agro-based economy (Glaze brook, 2002). Launching a series of indigenous cross-border dialogue and programs to address the limitations and strengthen women's chambers of commerce and business associations by building a network of women-led organizations from Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, India, Bhutan, Nepal, Bangladesh and Maldives. Thus, the role of women-led entrepreneurship can yield a vibrant cross-border trade cum dialogue and be pivotal in economic development and peace building efforts.

## **Arts and Culture**

Arts and culture as peace and a development medium can bring relief to disempowered and insecure victims of violence. Promoting sustainable development and peace building efforts through Arts and culture approaches is increasingly viewed as complementing institutional and structural peace building programming.

Identifying and focusing on similarities between arts and culture in the Pak-Afghan borderland can facilitate power negotiations and dialogue between opposed factions. Here, peace building efforts like concentrating on the similar music and cultural customs of the people of the Pak-Afghan borderland by promoting indigenous Pashtun plays and artwork can generate local artists' streams of income but can also provide a platform for peace within the region. Thus, one must acknowledge existing work on the ground, identify new avenues for collaborative mediums of expression through dramas, music, and art, and strive to build sustainable bridges led by women.

Arts and culture are a vital strand - complementing institutional and structural approaches to long-term development programming. Thus, given the indigenous creativity of women within the domain of Arts and culture (drama, poetry, theatre, visual and literary arts), one must acknowledge existing work on the ground and identify new avenues for collaborative mediums of expression through dramas, music, art and strive for building bridges led by women.

The critical point is that positive role and healthy interaction between and across other mediums of women's development and peace networks needs to be revisited and furthered. This paper proposes a multi-layered dialogue and understanding to learn from one another and move towards a regional conception of sustainable development through a women-centred prism.

## **Health**

It is an area and an issue that cuts across geographical, ideational and religious barriers and can serve as a medium of peace and collaboration in a highly disconnected region. Women's agency role as an active element in this realm should be stressed. To do so, women health practitioners' role as development agents and peace builders needs to be harnessed. This, in turn, needs an understanding of the extensive experiences and knowledge base that can be decisive in empowering women health practitioners with the trickle-down impact for sustainable peace across the region. The COVID -19 pandemic highlighted women's resilience and leadership in the context of peace builders and how women in cross-cutting arenas collaborated to foster development and inclusivity; for example, journalists like Anisa Shaheed, who collaborated with health workers and reported on COVID-19 in Afghanistan. Women across South Asia have been at the forefront of their nations' response towards health (Amnesty International, 2021).



This paper suggests forging a medium of dialogue, brainstorming and mutual training on health-centred issues and regular discussion on crucial health challenges among the practitioners. Thus, recognizing and empowering women health practitioners across the border by promoting dialogue on 'Development-through-Health' can serve as an effective medium for long-lasting peace throughout the region.

## **Recommendations**

- Pak-Afghan women's potential as a critical factor for long-term peace and stability is well-documented in numerous policy reports and pronouncements at the state, inter-state and regional levels but not realised in practice. To remove this caveat, women's peace building role in the health, education, economic entrepreneurship and art and culture sectors must be harnessed and recognised for sustainable development and peace process.
- In a highly disintegrated Pak-Afghan borderland, empowering women from within the existing patriarchal system is necessary. It is imperative to adopt a gender-lens approach to carve out indigenous models of empowerment that can be absorbed and accepted by society.
- Engaging with displaced families, women-headed households, war widows, community-based female leaders, academics, media personnel, healthcare workers, and entrepreneurs is imperative to achieve sustainable development. Women entrepreneurs must have digital and business skills to manage, grow, and sustain their firms.
- There is a need to establish cross-border South Asian indigenous platforms like the Afghan Women's Network, which recognises the limitations faced by women peacemakers and entrepreneurs in the marketplace. This is a long-term generational process achieved through education, small-medium scale enterprises and cottage industries.
- Recognising and monetising Women's role in social entrepreneurship is imperative for peace building efforts. Women as peace agents through economic empowerment should be weaved into the government policymaking strategy. This can be a collaborative effort between the private and public sectors. Hence, there is a need to build a network of trust by capitalising on these four pillars (Entrepreneurship, Health, Education and Arts) for sustainable peace.
- Women's contribution to the field of Arts and Culture as peace agents should be recognised. This can be effectively done by adopting an indigenous inside-out approach focusing on the commonalities of the Pak-Afghan heritage. This includes shared arts, dance, theatre, crafts and literary traditions.
- Identifying and addressing the barriers for small and medium-scale enterprises is vital to adopting gender mainstreaming tools. Innovative

training units for female entrepreneurs in diverse fields, like tailoring, e-commerce and agriculture, need to address critical capacity gaps.

## **Conclusion**

In lieu of the overleaf discussion, it is concluded that if women cannot perform their part in peace, economic, social, political, and environmental realms, the region cannot move in the direction of sustainable peace development. There is a need to revisit the existing women-led forums in South Asia and understand the impact of the hostile political landscape of the region. Innovative solutions by adopting an inside-out approach need to be implemented by developing a network of empowered South Asian women.

It is highly recommended that building alliances among (health, education, economic and arts plus culture) strategic groupings, training peace volunteers, and raising awareness around women's participation in long-lasting development processes can be a plausible way forward. In crux, adopting a futuristic approach through recognizing the role of women in education, health, economic entrepreneurship, arts and culture within the region is crucial for sustainable peace. To implement SDGs, it is necessary to invest in gender-responsive analysis in the Pak-Afghan region to identify the conventions and preconceptions that prevent women from fully participating in peace building and economic growth.

In a nutshell, a holistic, people-centric approach to re-think the South Asian security framework is the need of the hour. This implies rethinking a state society's social contract. In doing so, the role of women's agency for sustainable peace and security cannot and must not be ignored. South Asian women, despite all odds, are resilient in nature – can be an asset than a liability if tapped effectively and innovatively. That is, women encompass the backbone of all societies, whether peaceful, stable or in turmoil – skill-based training, tapping into economic opportunities, observance of justice across the board, giving a right to education and undoing of gender-based discrimination – needs commitment, investment (fiscal and time) by the nation states and international community. This is essentially a long-term and generational process that necessitates re-think and re-imagine and re-play the role of women as peacemakers through economic empowerment and entrepreneurship.

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